

# THE HIGHWOODS OF BEXHILL



BEXHILL CENTENARY YEAR

2002



Ancient Pollarded Beach Tree in the Highwoods

# THE HIGHWOODS OF BEXHILL

## AN EXPLORATION OF LOCAL HISTORY

***Joan M. Vann***

***With maps by Ann Vollar***

**BEXHILL CENTENARY YEAR 2002**

This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Katherine Herrin Leakey. Katherine and her West Highland Terrier were frequent visitors to the Highwoods and she was a member of the Highwoods Preservation Society

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# THE HIGHWOODS OF BEXHILL

## AN EXPLORATION OF LOCAL HISTORY

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# **THE HIGHWOODS OF BEXHILL**

## **AN EXPLORATION OF LOCAL HISTORY**

### **Introduction**

The freehold of the area we now know as the Highwoods is owned by East Sussex County Council and since 1981 it has been leased to Rother District Council for 999 years on a peppercorn rent. The day to day management of the woods is carried out by volunteers working for the charity 'The Highwoods Preservation Society'. Access to the woods is free to all. There are way-marked paths for walkers, a 'disabled trail' for users of wheelchairs and a separate track for horse-riding. Our Honorary Warden, Alan Malpass, oversees the management of the woods. He also arranges for guided walks and group visits by schools and local organisations.

The woodland has its own special beauty at all times of the year. There are carpets of bluebells and anemones in the spring. Summer sees many butterflies in the clearings. Autumn brings the brilliant colours of the turning leaves and winter has its own delights showing the intricate patterns of the bare trees against the sky. Walking through these woods questions arise:-

Have the woods always been like this ? Who walked through these woods in the past? How old are the trees ? How did this land arrive in the ownership of East Sussex County Council ? What part have these woods played in the long history of Bexhill ?

History is the story of man and his environment. Like many stories it is built partly on fact and partly on the way that historians and others have interpreted these facts. This brief introduction to the history of the Highwoods is a mixture of fact and speculation and in the future new evidence may cause interpretations to change – history never stands still !

This book is in four parts. The first part looks at the physical landscape of Bexhill and at its attractions as a place for human settlement. The Highwoods always need to be seen in the context of the wider landscape of East Sussex. The second part looks at the complex patterns of land ownership from the days of King Offa to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Part III sees the Highwoods as a working wood as for centuries it was an economic asset of the area. Finally Part IV looks at the history of the woods in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and leaves us with the question as to what the 21<sup>st</sup> century will bring to the Highwoods of Bexhill.

The book, therefore, can be seen as a starter pack for future local historians. In order to help their explorations, references are given at the end of the text. The main sources used for the book have been as follows:-Documents and maps stored in the East Sussex Records Office in Lewes, the archives of Bexhill Museum and the local history section of Bexhill Library.

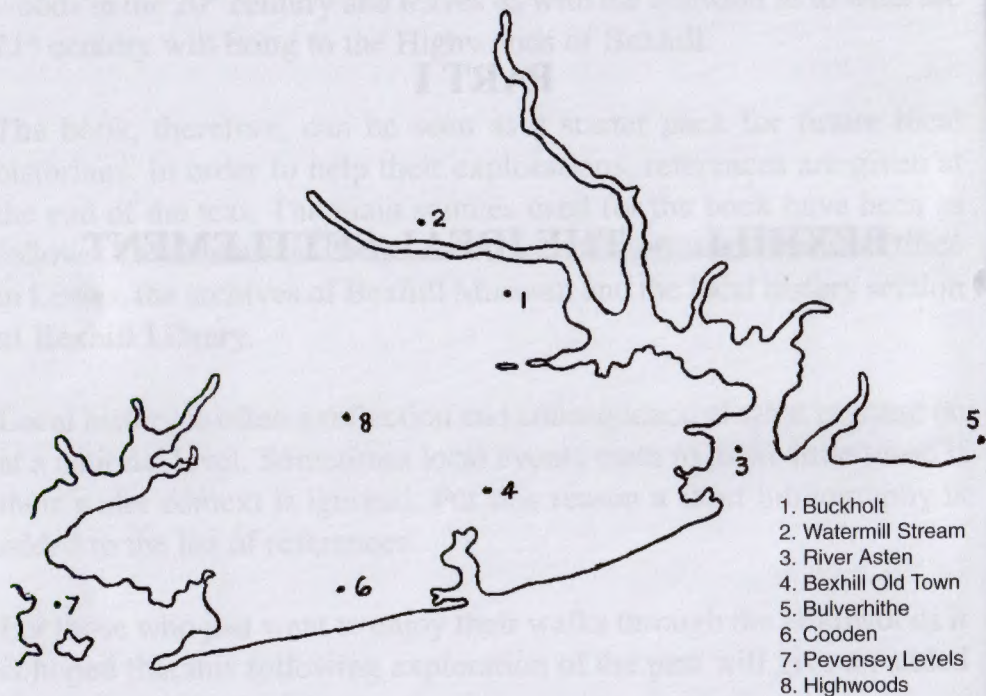
Local history is often a reflection and consequence of what is going on at a national level. Sometimes local events seem to make little sense if their wider context is ignored. For this reason a short bibliography is added to the list of references.

For those who just want to enjoy their walks through the Highwoods it is hoped that this following exploration of the past will give an added dimension to their pleasure.

## PART I

## BEXHILL - THE IDEAL SETTLEMENT

Fig. 2 Sketch Map of the Bexhill area at the time of King Offa in 772



## **PART I**

### **BEXHILL - THE IDEAL SETTLEMENT**

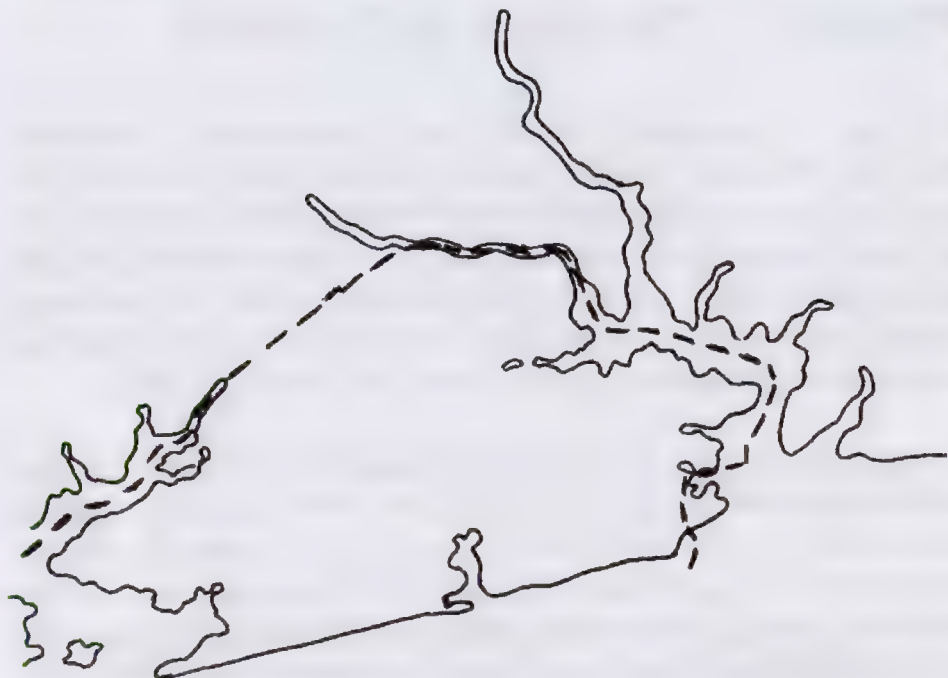
The physical landscape of Bexhill, like all landscapes, is constantly changing. When the Romans came to the area 2000 years ago, the coastline was very different from that of today. The densely wooded high weald had many fast flowing rivers and streams draining out into the English Channel. Sandstone cliffs alternated with river estuaries, lagoons and un-drained marshland. The main entry to the hinterland was by the rivers which penetrated miles back into the weald.

A study of the current geological survey map (Sheet 320/321) brings to life some of the changes of the past 2000 years. This map cannot be photographed as it is protected by copyright but it shows the areas of alluvial soil to the east and west of Bexhill. These areas once formed the beds of river systems which together with the sea to the south would have made the Bexhill area into a large peninsular surrounded by water on three sides. Figure 2 is a sketch map based on the geological survey map. This shows where there would have been rivers and estuaries in the past.

Here the sea lies to the south, the Asten river valley to the east and in the west are the flooded Pevensey Levels with streams draining down from Ninfield and Hooe. One stream, which today runs alongside the west boundary of the Highwoods, would have been a fast flowing stream coming down the valley from the Ninfield ridge.

The whole area formed a good strategic position for a settlement as it was on an extensive peninsular of high and dry land.

Figure 3 shows the boundary of the present civil parish of Bexhill superimposed onto the sketch map in Figure 2



There is evidence here to suggest that this is an ancient boundary which was first determined by geological features. It outlines an area of land which would have been very suitable for a self supporting settlement.

The earliest documentary record which defines a boundary for a settlement in Bexhill is that found in Offa's charter. The written charter is now in the library of Lambeth Palace and was probably written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However it would have been based on the oral tradition of King Offa's grant of land to the Bishop of Selsey in 772AD.

A settlement at this time would have been seen by Offa not only as a base for the Bishop's ministry but also as one of the strategic eastern outposts for his kingdom. He would have wanted land which could be defended against invasion from land and sea. It would need a supply of

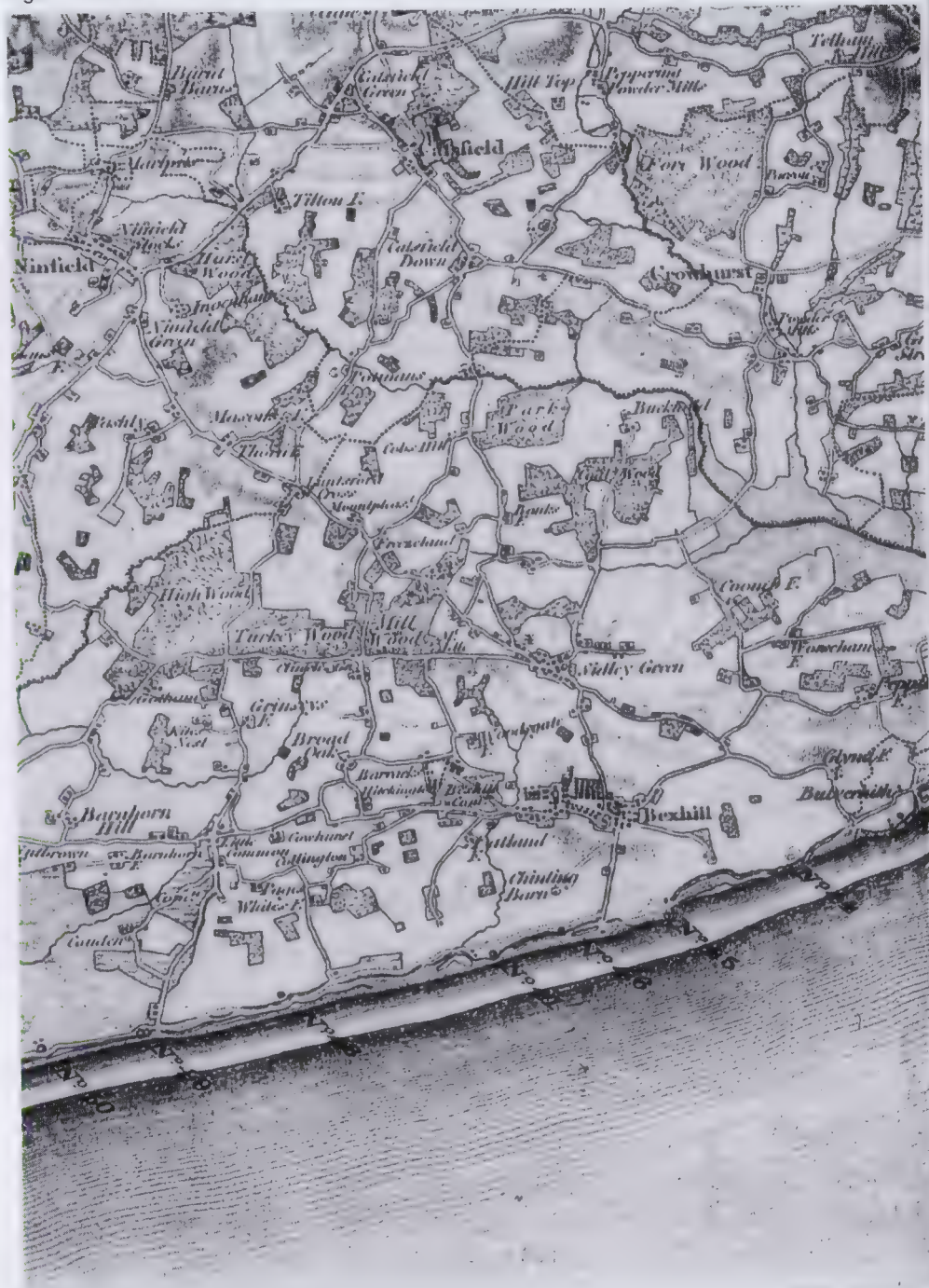
fresh water, land suitable for arable farming and a forest area to give a supply of fuel and timber. An area of forest would also enable clearings to be made as pastures for domestic animals. In addition it would give a good supply of game. It would be desirable to have a good river link with the weald and to have access to the ancient east-west ridge road which ran along the coast. Access to the sea was a necessity either by a nearby harbour or by a shingle beach. Bexhill met all these requirements.

Although our first documentary evidence of a settlement in Bexhill lies in Offa's charter the suitability of the area for a settlement suggests that it might have been occupied in earlier days. At the present time there is no archaeological evidence for any earlier settlement, neither in Roman times nor in the prehistoric era. However fragments of evidence give clues as to possible past inhabitants. Bexhill Museum has a good selection of stone-age flints. Many came from Bexhill and several from Ninfield which lies immediately to the north of the Highwoods. We can imagine mesolithic hunters camping out on the sandy high ground north of the upper pond in the Highwoods – but this is speculation.

The concept of Bexhill being an ideal area for a self-contained settlement emphasises the importance of the forest on its northern boundaries. Good woodland was a necessity for any growing settlement. Woodland based on clay and sandstone was an added bonus as it gave the material for building and domestic requirements.

The earliest detailed map of the area is the first ordnance survey of 1813. This shows Bexhill as a small settlement still having a substantial amount of woodland north of the town.

Fig. 4 1813



Today much of the ancient woodland around Bexhill has disappeared. To the east of the Highwoods the modern need for building materials has resulted in the woodland being replaced by the clay pits of the Turkey Road brickworks.

This photograph (fig.5) looks east towards Bexhill cemetery and the Highlands. Many trees remain in the area but the roof tops show where a modern settlement has arrived. South of the Highlands place names remind us of the past. Woodsgate Park is on the site of Woodsgate farm which dates back at least to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This would have been on the boundary between the arable fields and the surrounding woodland.

Fig. 5



In the past these woods were not just part of the natural woodland on the northern high ground, they were managed as an integral part of the local economy. Their importance lasted right through to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the population of Bexhill grew from 12,213 in 1901 to 38,905 in 1991. These new settlers in the area no longer wanted the economy of Bexhill to be one of self- sufficiency and the social and economic changes of the century altered the way in which settlers valued their woods.

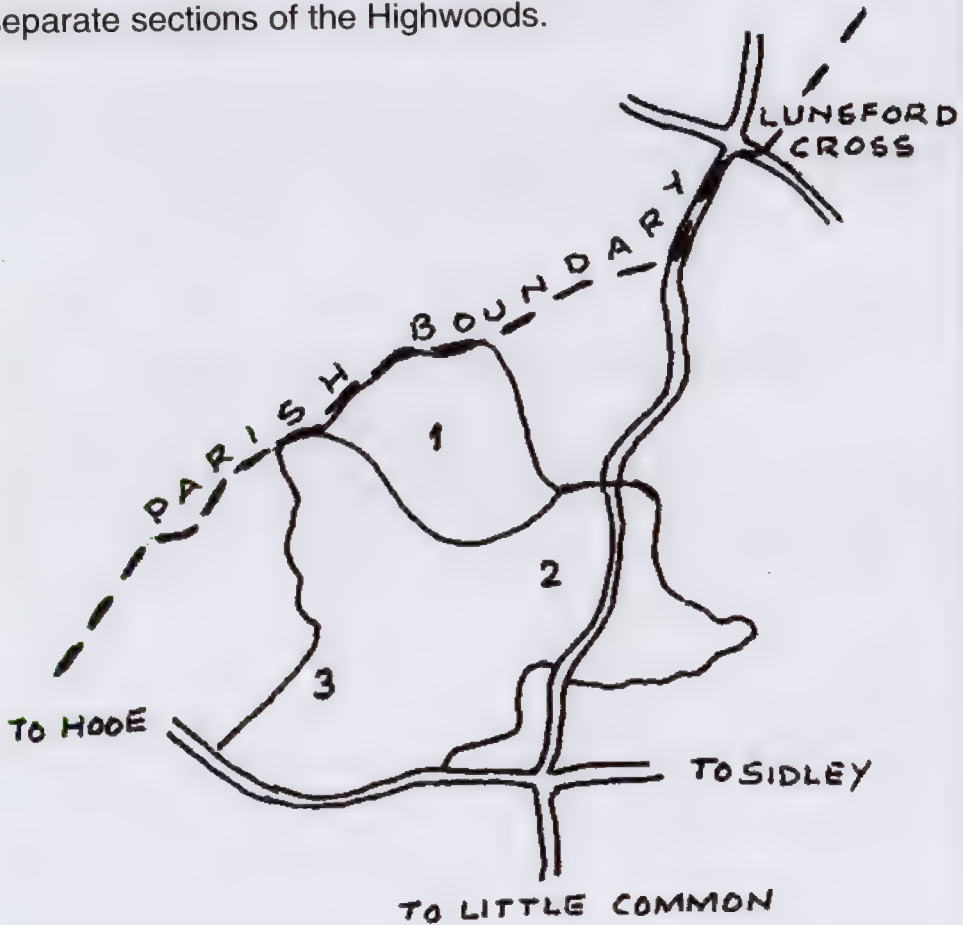
In the 21<sup>st</sup> century how will the settlement of Bexhill see its remaining woodland ? Are the woods an economic asset, a scientific data base, a social amenity, an historic part of our heritage or an area which gives us aesthetic pleasure by its natural beauty ? Can the Highwoods be all of these things and what will the settlers of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century make of our value systems ? Will global warming change the Sussex coast line and will the settlers of the future have to move inland onto this higher ground ?

These questions challenge us to consider the past and speculate about the future. A walk in Highwoods can result in our thinking about its place in the continuum of man's relationship with his environment.

## **PART II**

### **SOME OWNERS AND TENANTS OF THE WOODS IN THE HIGHWOODS**

Fig. 6 Sketch Map based on the 1:25000 Ordnance Survey of 1982. This illustrates the separate sections of the Highwoods.



1. Jack of Borehams Wood
2. Great Highwood
3. South West Section

## **PART II**

### **SOME OWNERS AND TENANTS OF THE WOODS IN THE HIGHWOODS**

The ordnance survey maps of the past 190 years show that our 87.6 acres, known as the Highwoods, incorporate several smaller woods. These woods can be divided into three separate areas. The first, to the north, is Jack O'Boreham's wood. The second to the south and east is Great Highwood. The dividing line between these two areas is the natural boundary of the steep ghyll which runs east to west from Pear Tree Lane to the stream on the western boundary of the woods. The third area lies in the south-western corner of the 87.6 acres and includes several smaller woods. These woods are no longer identifiable but were once narrow strips of land running from north to south, today there are tracks in the wood which might well have run between these sections. The sections have had a variety of names, changes perhaps indicating a change of use or of ownership. These names have included :- Freehold wood, Heath wood, New Cut wood, High wood, Staplers wood and Augers wood.

The sketch map in figure 6 is based on the 1:25000 ordnance survey map of 1982 and shows the distinct sections of the wood.

Questions arise: Why does such a small area of woodland contain so many different woods ? Does this mean that there was a major division of the land in the past or is it due to past owners selling small plots in a random manner ? Who were these owners and why did they want such small pieces of woodland ?

Up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century woodland was an essential economic asset for any farm or estate. Land, which has a strategic value, has always been sought after and the Highwoods are no exception. To unravel the detailed story of the owners of the Highwoods would take some years of research, so the following snap shots from the past are designed to give an overall picture of the many changes it has seen.

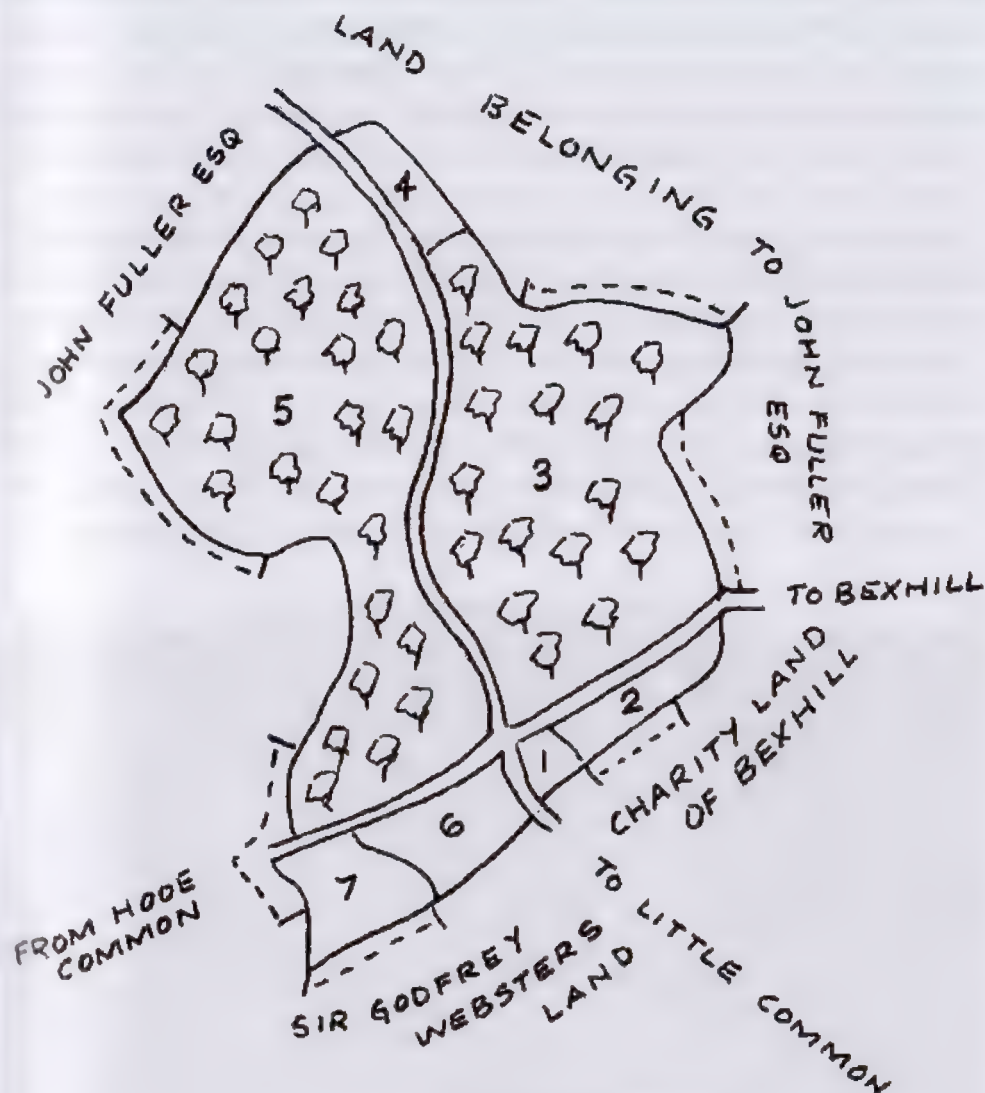
Going back to 772AD, this was the time when King Offa is thought to have granted the land around Bexhill to the Bishop of Selsey. Offa owned the land by right of Kingship. In 1066 William took the throne and with it the land. He then redistributed it among his followers. The Bexhill land went to the Earl of Eu and the Domesday book shows that he in turn gave some to his supporters.

After 1066 the see of Selsey was replaced by the see of Chichester and from the beginning the Bishopric claimed that it and not the Earl of Eu had the right to the land in Bexhill. The conflict had a long and complicated history and was not resolved for 200 years. In 1259 the crown restored lands in Bexhill back to the see of Chichester. However in the course of the dispute a compromise was reached and the manors of Cooden and Buckhurst were not returned to the church.

This decision of 1259 meant that not all of the woodland to the north of Bexhill returned to the see of Chichester. In the absence of maps in these early times the following is a supposition. Probably our Highwoods were part of Offa's original grant and when the land was returned in 1259 only the area now known as The Great Highwood went back to the church.

The evidence to support this theory lies in a map of 1792. This map was drawn to show the Duke of Dorset's lands in Bexhill. Figure 7 shows that The Great Highwood was part of his estate and we know that this estate was part of the land granted to the Earl Sackville by Elizabeth I in 1570.

Fig. 7 Sketch Map from the Duke of Dorset's Survey 1792  
showing the Great High Wood.



Contents of the High Wood

	A	R	P
1. Little Field		3	
2. Wood Field	2	2	32
3. Little High Wood	26	3	23
4. Cooding Croft	1	3	20
5. Great High Wood	33	3	1
6. Ruff Field	3	3	1
7. Furzy Field	3	1	1

Just as William took the land rights from the Bishop of Selsey in 1066, so nearly 300 years later in 1561 the crown took back the land from the Bishop of Chichester. Henry VIII had carried out his policy of the dissolution of the monasteries and in neighbouring Battle the Abbey estates had been given to one of his supporters. His daughter Elizabeth I later carried out a slow but effective policy of regaining church lands for the crown. She needed the money to replenish a depleted Treasury so sought the wealth of the Episcopal lands. By act of Parliament when a Bishopric became vacant the crown was allowed to step in and take over the landed property of the see. After the death of the Bishop of Chichester eight manors were taken by the crown and these were described in the diocesan records as being 'all of which manours were given to God and the Bishop of Chichester 300 years before' The manor of Bexhill went to the crown and the church lands in Bexhill were reduced to the small area of glebeland needed for its support.

Fig. 8



In 1570 Elizabeth I gave the manor to Thomas Sackville and there is a documented history of its descent to the Duke of Dorset whose map of 1792 shows The Great Highwood as being part of his estate. By the time of the Bexhill tithe map of 1839 The Great Highwood was in the ownership of the Earl of Amherst and its boundaries had remained unaltered during all its years in the Sackville estate.

The Northern boundary of the Great Highwood runs along the ghyll separating it from Jack O'Boreham's wood. The 1792 map shows fencing on the north and west boundaries. Today there are traces of a wood bank in the area and it still has the remains of an ancient line of Beech trees. This species was often used as a boundary tree and as such would have been pollarded at regular intervals. The photographs in Figures 8 and 9 show the wood today with the remains of an old wood bank with its row of ancient beech trees.

Fig. 9



The history of the ownership of Jack O'Boreham's wood is not easy to trace. The wood lies to the north of the ghyll and in the west borders onto the present civil parish of Ninfield. This boundary lies along the stream which runs north to south along the west side of the Highwoods. In the past the stream would have been a natural boundary between the uplands of Bexhill and the lands of Ninfield and Hooe. Readers interested in the siting of ancient boundaries may see this as the past boundary between the Bishop's land and those of the prebends of Ninfield and Hooe.

Fig. 10



An ancient hedgerow now marks this boundary and a recent species count indicates that it may date back to medieval times.

Fig. 11 Sketch Map of the Highwoods  
showing Jack of Borehams Wood  
based on Bexhill Tithe Map 1839

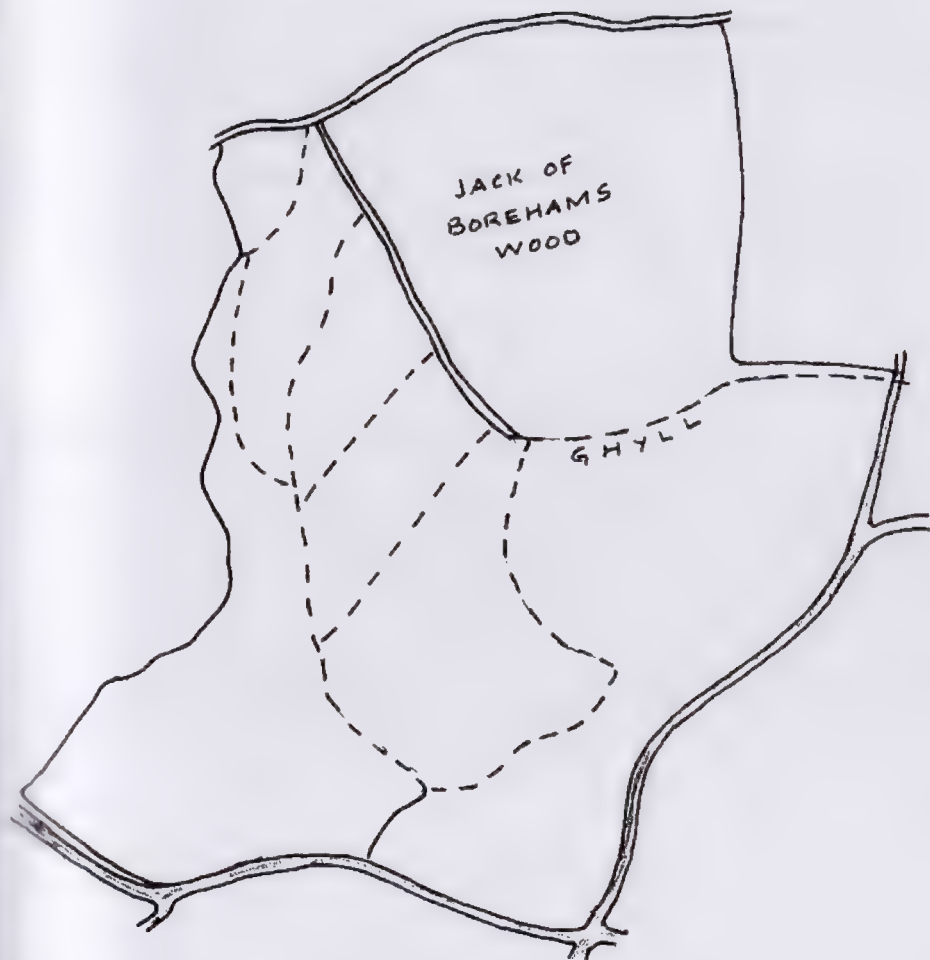
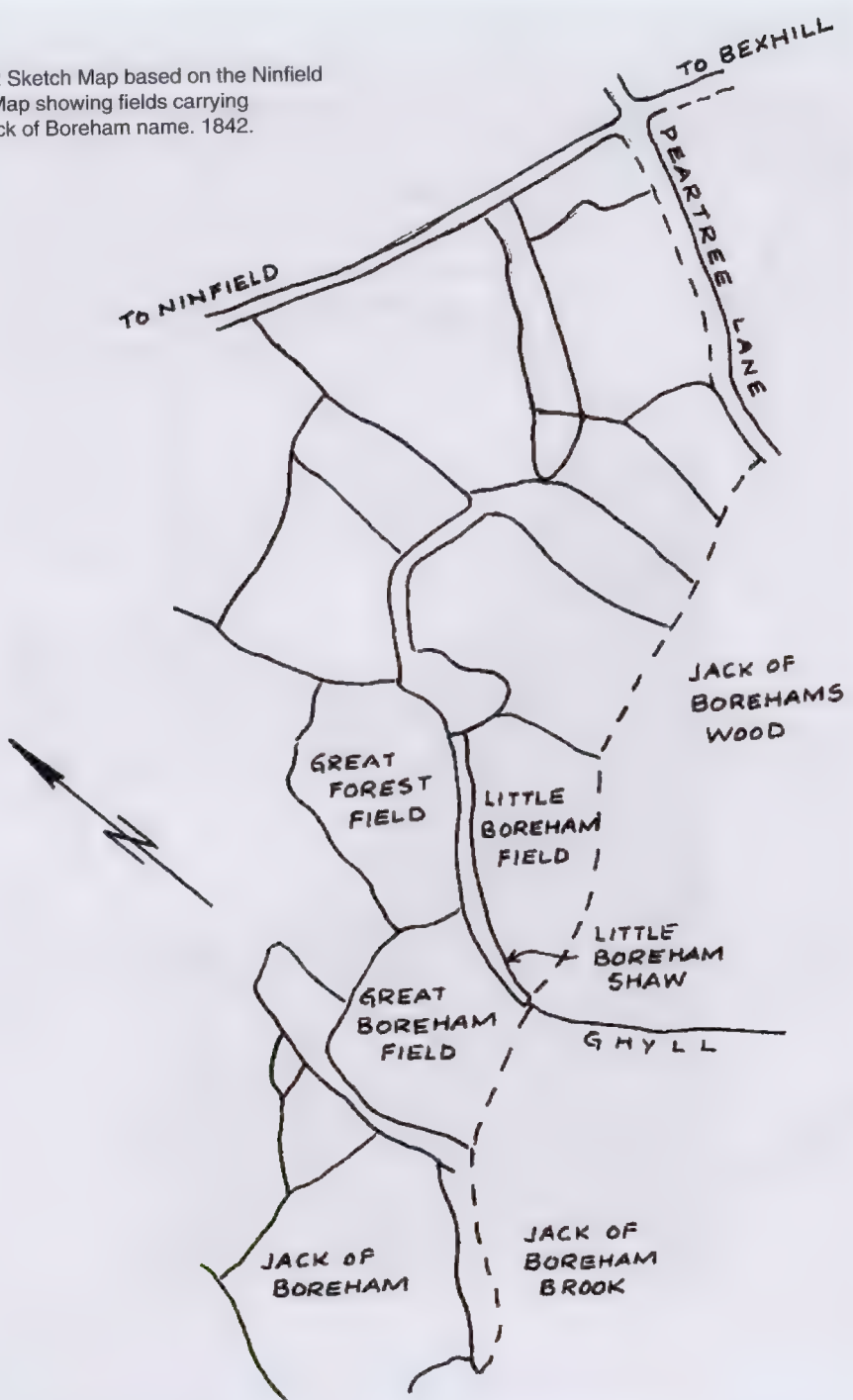


Fig. 12 Sketch Map based on the Ninfield  
Tithe Map showing fields carrying  
the Jack of Boreham name. 1842.

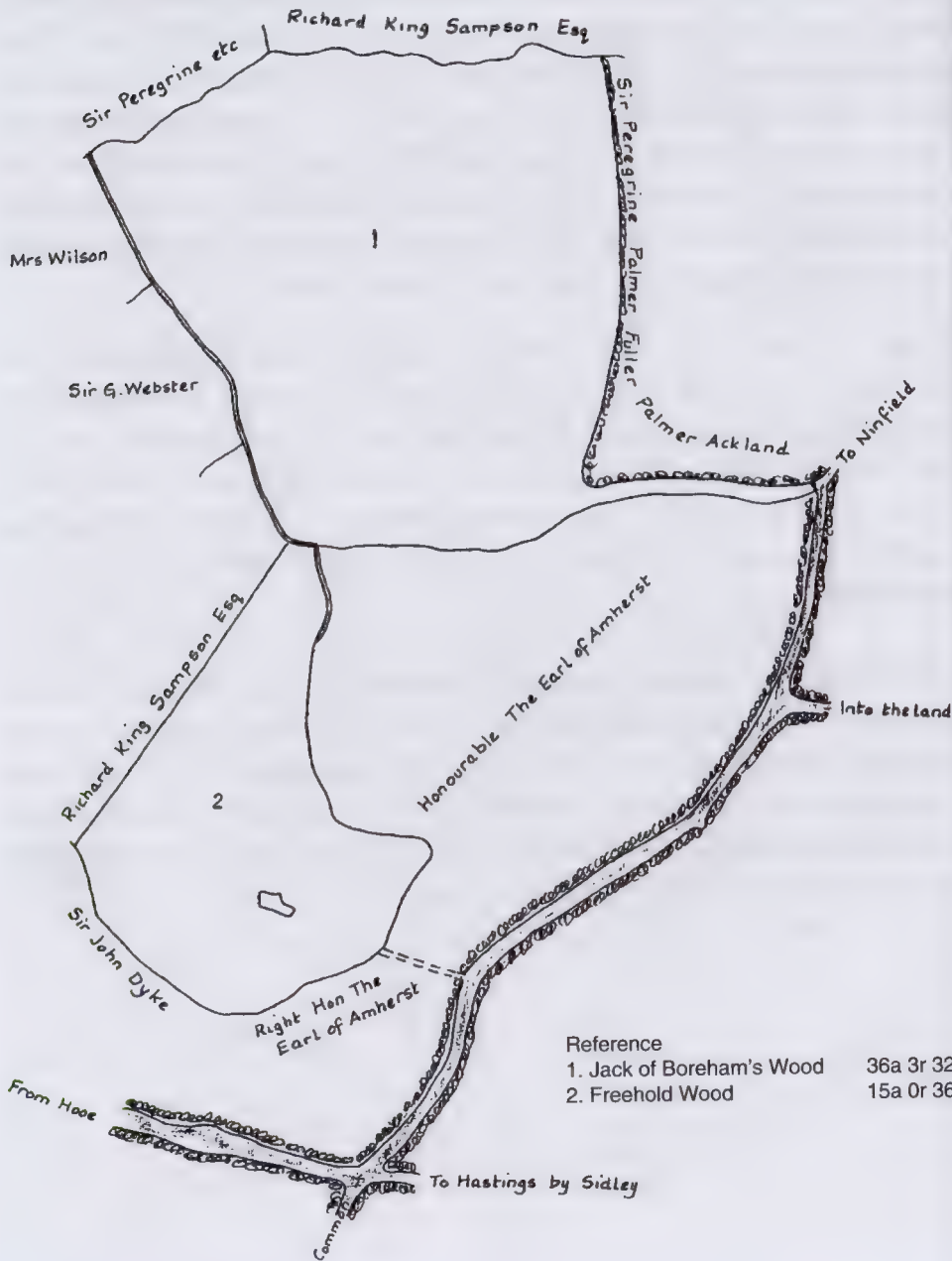


The name Jack O'Boreham suggests that it dates back to medieval times but Jack O'Boreham has proved to be an elusive character. In 1332 a John Somers de Boreham witnessed a legal document which is still extant. Another possible nominee is a John Colbrand who was living at Boreham Manor in 1360. The family was later connected by marriage to the influential Pelham family and in 1599 a James Colbrand was made deputy Lieutenant of the county. His son became a baronet but the title became extinct in 1709. Boreham Manor as a residence seems to have been abandoned in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and after 1709 the manorial lands were split up to become part of other estates.

Figure 12 shows Jack O'Boreham's wood with its neighbours Great Boreham field, Little Boreham field, Jack O'Boreham's field and Jack O'Boreham's shaw. It is possible therefore that a substantial piece of land in this area once belonged to the manor of Boreham. In the 1300's this might all have been woodland and the fields might have been the result of subsequent clearance. As yet no documentary evidence has been found.

In the 1700's the manorial lands were broken up. There is then a complex pattern of land transfers by inheritance, sales and marriage settlements but some specific facts emerge about our woodland. In 1714 a map commissioned by William Roberts of Ticehurst shows that he owned the 52 acres of Jack O'Boreham's wood. The land then remained in the ownership of this family for over a century.

Fig. 13 Plan of the Freehold Woods The Property of John Roberts Dunn Esq  
in the Parish of Bexhill in the County of Sussex 1851  
original drawn by Thomas Relf.



Reference	
1. Jack of Boreham's Wood	36a 3r 32p
2. Freehold Wood	15a 0r 36p

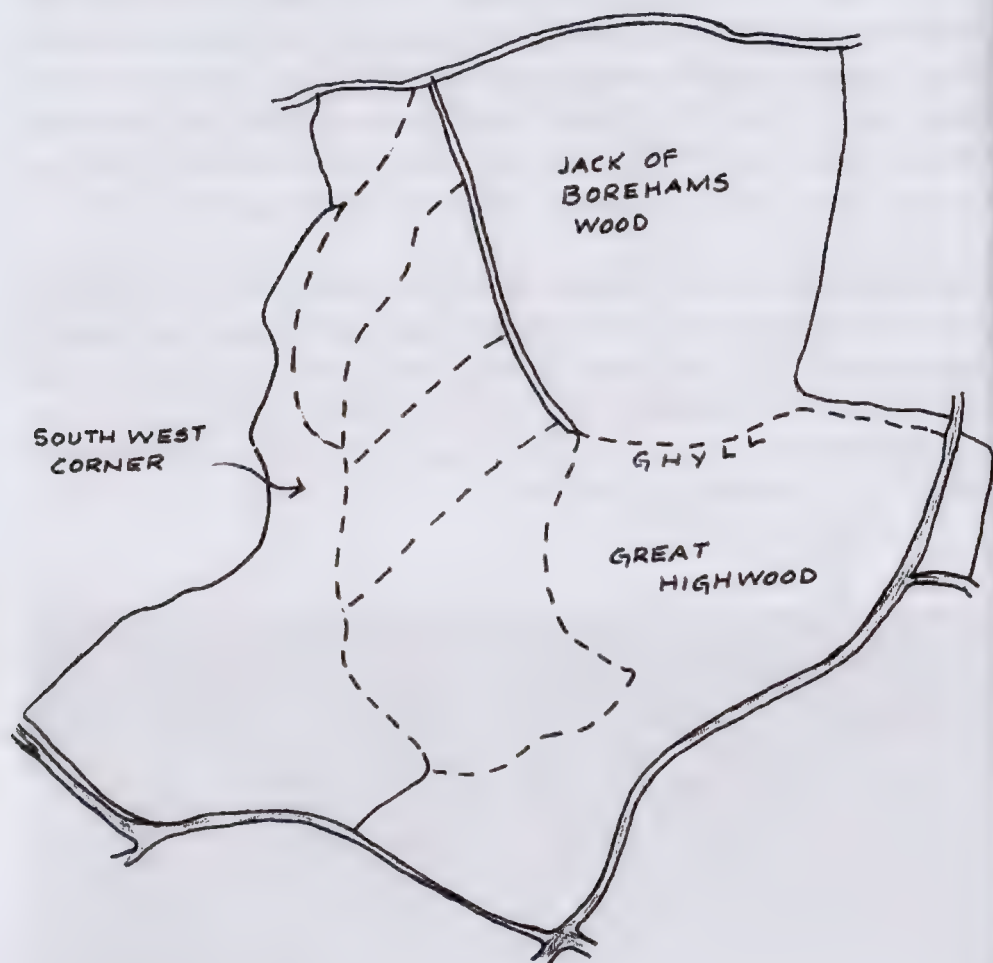
In 1839 the Bexhill Tithe map shows that the wood was owned by John Roberts and in 1851 Thomas Relf's map of the property of John Roberts Dunn includes Jack O'Boreham's wood. The name Roberts Dunn came from a marriage between the two families. Later changes in the ownership of Jack O'Boreham's wood can be traced right through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and shows that the wood has retained its individual identity for at least as long as its neighbour The Great Highwood.

The history of the third section of the Highwoods is very different from that of its two neighbours. The earliest composite map is the Bexhill Tithe map of 1839. This shows that this small area of land was divided into unequal strips running from north to South. Figure 15 is a sketch from the tithe map. Figure 14 below shows one of the many old tracks which once divided the woodland.

Fig. 14



Fig. 15 Sketch Map of the Highwoods based on the Bexhill Tithe Map of 1839 showing the divisions of the wood in the south west corner.



In 1839 the owner of the eastern strip was John Roberts whom we have already met as the then owner of Jack O'Boreham's wood. Another strip was owned by Sir Godfrey Webster and it is possible to trace this parcel of land back to medieval times when it was part of the manor of Barnhorn. The land was once owned by the Abbot of Battle Abbey and on the dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII the king granted the manor to Sir Anthony Browne. It was later sold to the Webster family who held it at the time of the Bexhill Tithe map of 1839.

The owners of the other strips of woodland are less easy to identify. The area is a typical example of the way in which land in East Sussex has constantly been divided, sub divided, sold or passed on by marriage or inheritance. It has often been bought as an investment or used to support loans or mortgages. In 1711 the Fuller family bought a parcel of land in this area of the Highwoods and the estate documents record the searches for previous ownership. The record covers the period 1621 to 1700 and for a piece of land probably not more than 10 acres. The following extract shows how many people could have had an interest in the land in just over 80 years:-

- '1621      *George Colman of Hooe, Blacksmith sold the land to John Barter of Bexhill, Yeoman and Richard Weekes of Bexhill, Yeoman.*
- 1648/9    *Richard Barham of Bexhill, tailor, and wife Elizabeth daughter and heir of Robert Barber dec'd, and Richard Colman Blacksmith, sold the land to Bartholomew Boorne of Battle, Yeoman.*
- 1674      *Thomas Boorne of Guestling sold the land to Thomas Faithful of Guestling, Yeoman.*
- 1700      *Richard Fuller bought the land from Thomas Faithful.'*

Adjoining land sold during these years had owners who lived well away from the Highwoods. One was a yeoman from Brede, another a cordwainer from Battle and yet another cordwainer who came from Robertsbridge. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Fuller family had sold the woodland and this area had constant changes of ownership up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The search for the owners of land in the Highwoods has shown up one of the problems of using old maps for the purpose of research. The 1792 Duke of Dorset's estate map (shown in figure 7) gives the owner of the land north of Great Highwood as being 'John Fuller Esq.'

This land is Jack O'Boreham's wood and this has already been established as being land belonging to the Roberts Family. Early estate maps were excellent for their purpose but often were less accurate in recording the names of adjacent landowners. These names were often included almost as a decoration around the margins of the detailed map. We know from sale documents that the Fuller family were buying land in the Highwoods in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but this was in the south west sector. The 1842 Ninfield Tithe map gives the Fuller family as owners of Jack O'Boreham's field and Jack O'Boreham's shaw. Maybe the map-makers of 1792 did not check the finer details when writing in John Fuller's name as being the immediate neighbour of the Great Highwood.

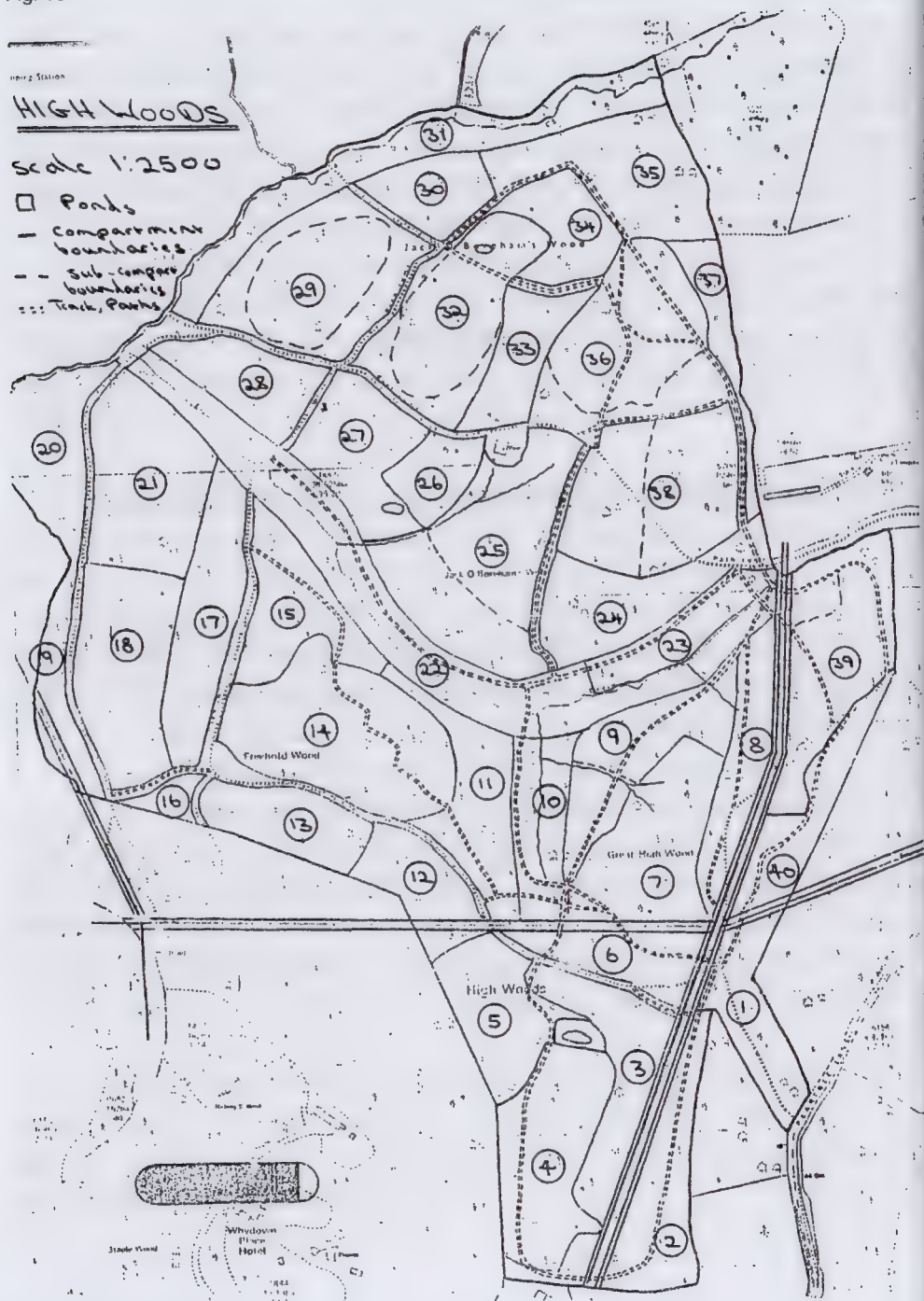
So far in this part only landowners have been considered. Landowners however are only part of the story of the Highwoods. Many other people had an interest in the land, these were the tenants who often took on the land on a short term lease. The Bexhill tithe map of 1839 shows that at that time there were eight people owning land in the Highwoods. Only one of these owners actually worked the land himself and this was a small five-acre strip in the south west corner of the woods. The other woodland was occupied by tenants. Two of these tenants were named as farmers – James Turner of Glyne Farm and Thomas Christmas of Barnhorn Farm. A set of 19<sup>th</sup> century farm accounts of 1876 show that the incoming tenant for an unspecified section of the Highwoods was a Walter Smith of Gt Worsham Farm. These examples show that farmers from the Bexhill area found it worth their while to take up the tenancy of small pieces of woodland not immediately adjacent to their farms.

Over the past thousand years the 87.6 acres of the Highwoods have been known to a large number of owners and tenants. Why did they find this small area to be an economic acquisition ? The answers lie in the use they made of the land.

## **PART III**

### **THE HIGHWOODS 'ALIAS THE FORREST'**

Fig. 16



## PART III

### THE HIGHWOODS 'ALIAS THE FORREST'

Walking through the woods today it is not immediately evident that the Highwoods are man made. However you soon notice that the different species of tree often occur in compact parcels, you walk through areas of sweet chestnut and then find it changes to areas of birch or hazel. You are walking through one of the few surviving examples of traditionally coppiced woodland in East Sussex. We do not know when the first coppices were planted in the Highwoods but the skills and knowledge of coppicing might have been brought into the area as far back as Roman times. The first plantations were made by clearing and planting up areas of the ancient forests and it is probable that coppicing was already a local skilled procedure when King Offa made his grant of land to the Bishop of Selsey in 772.

Nearly a thousand years later a sale document of 1680 refers to the 'Highwoods alias the forrest' so we know that the woodland on the high ground surrounding Bexhill was once known as a forest. Today the popular idea of a forest is of a densely wooded area. However in the past a forest was a mixture of man made and natural habitats. A medieval forest would have had areas of broad leaf woodland with many old established trees such as oak, ash and beech. Other areas would have been cleared and would have had plantations of trees grown for cropping at regular intervals. Some would have grown in cycles of ten to twenty-five years before each crop was taken. There would have been rows of young standard oaks and areas of sweet chestnut, hornbeam, alder, ash, birch and hazel. The undergrowth would have been kept clear and the land would have provided pannage for the essential medieval domestic animal, the pig.

The Highwoods today still show the variety of plantations that went to make up a working wood. Today the aim is to preserve these trees which form part of our local history. The Preservation Society's management plan (figure 16) shows the woods as having 40 different sections each with its own cycle of growth and plans for coppicing at regular intervals.

In the past the woods were cultivated in response to the demand for their products and over the past thousand years this has varied a great deal. So far there is little specific documentary evidence of the exact products of the Highwoods, but clues may one day be found in the estate and farm records of the area. However the following cameos of the past help to build up a picture of the Highwoods as a working wood.

Before the coming of mass produced cheap farm tools and machinery the woodlands provided the farmer with the requirements for his work. Just some of these needs would have been for carts, rakes, hafts of axes, scythes, shovels, shoulder yokes, besoms, and flails. Each object required a specific type of wood and each species was valued for its own unique quality.

For example Hazel provided masses of slender straight shoots ideal for hurdles. Sweet chestnut is easy to cleave and makes excellent paling for fences, it was also used in great quantities for hop poles, taking about 15 years to grow to the required height. Hornbeam provided a very hard wood and made excellent bowls also pulley blocks for the machinery in water and windmills. Hornbeam also burns at a very high temperature, so was in demand for fires and furnaces.

In the past the demand for woodland products has sometimes come from national rather than immediate local needs. On occasion there has been a demand for timber for the defence of the realm. In the 1300's East Sussex was called on to supply the needs of Dover Castle. It had a vast demand for all types of wood and this was often sent by sea to avoid the difficulties of overland transport. In 1326 the local port of Bulverhythe records the shipping of 175 oaks from Crowhurst to Bulverhythe then on by sea to Dover. This involved 248 wagon loads and the account states that in order to get the wagons to Bulverhythe a large quantity of hurdles and faggots of scrub were needed to get the wagons over the ditches in the area. This demonstrates the difficulty of transport in an area of clay soil and no doubt the Highwoods had to supply similar items to local farmers in Bexhill.

The Sussex iron industry also made great demands on the Sussex woodlands. The peak demand came in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At this time charcoal was needed for the furnaces and it is likely that this was produced in the Highwoods. Special wood had to be grown and coppiced. The high demand for charcoal finished when the use of coke and the new technology of the 18<sup>th</sup> century resulted in moving the heart of the iron industry from Sussex to the north of England. Some charcoal was still needed for domestic use and for the local brick kilns. These kilns however were mainly fired by faggots cut from the underwood. There is evidence of at least one charcoal hearth in the Highwoods, the surface charcoal shows that it was in use as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Charcoal is now produced on an industrial basis but the following photograph shows charcoal burners at work in Sussex woodland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such a scene would once have been a familiar sight in the Highwoods.

Fig. 17



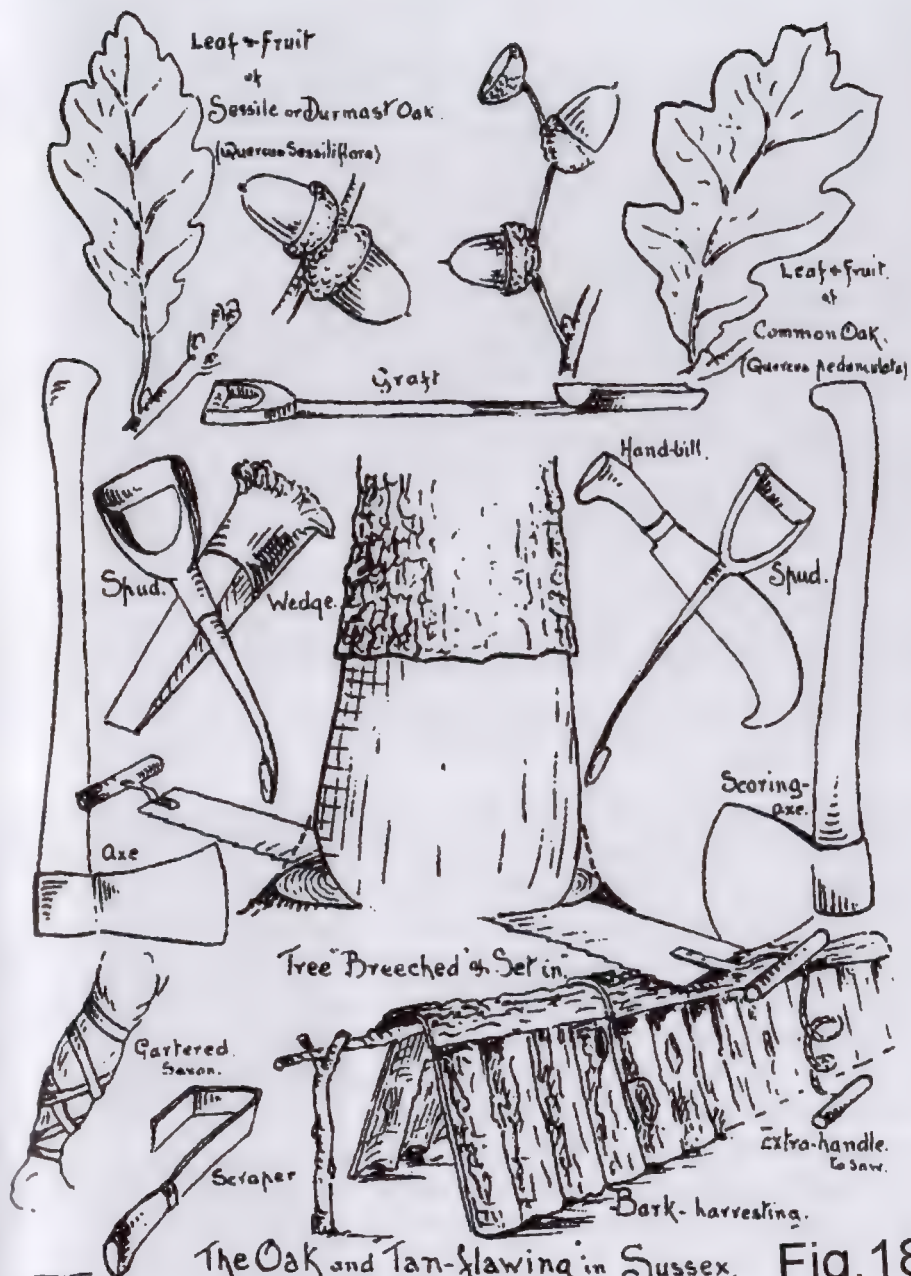
The demand for woodland products has always varied and can account for the many changes of ownership and tenancies of the woods. A letter in the records of the Fuller family written in 1723 discusses the problem of lack of demand for their hop poles, spray and cordwood. The writer comments:-

*'I believe another year may be better because of the great increase in the hop plantations upon the rise ( in price) of hops, when everybody will want poles.'*

At this time there was a rapid expansion of the hop industry and this helped to keep up the price of coppiced wood. There was a hop garden just north of the Highwoods and some of its poles may have been cut in the woods. Coppicing for hop poles soon proved to be a risky venture as the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the increase in disease in hops and the cheap import of continental crops.

Another woodland product for which there was once a local demand was oak wood and bark. The oak has been known as the weed of the weald because of its natural propagation and ease of cultivation. It provided excellent wood for wattles, planks, posts and fencing rails. One special demand in our area came from the local tanning industry. The Highwoods had a local customer in the tannery on the borders of Hooe and Ninfield, now known as The Tanyards. The bark of the oak was stripped by a process called flaving. It was then cleaned of moss and hatched into small strips for delivery to the tannery.

The photograph in figure 19 and sketch in figure 18 were published in the Sussex County magazine in the 1920's.



The Oak and Tan-flawing in Sussex. Fig. 18

EX. 13

Fig. 19

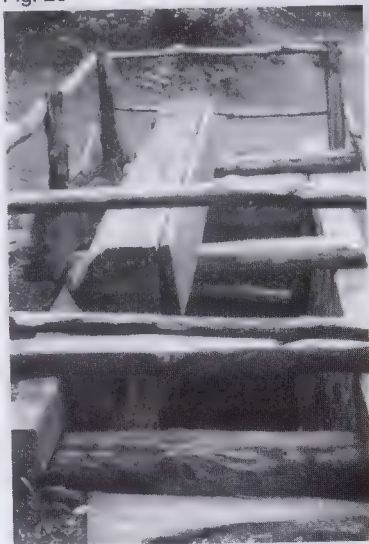


This would have been a familiar scene in the Highwoods up to the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tannery at Ninfield was recorded as working from the early 1600's right through to its final closure in 1886. The industrialisation of the leather industry and the import of a bark extract from Africa ended the local manual efforts in the Sussex woods.

The cultivation of stands of oak trees on the clay soils required good drainage and ditches of about three feet in depth were dug in the plantations. Today in the Highwoods there is still evidence of these drainage ditches especially in the area of the Great Highwood.

The clay soil in the neighbourhood made road haulage difficult for the large wagons so in most woodlands much of the wood was cut up on site. This made transport easier. The cutting of the larger trunks was undertaken in saw-pits. This photograph of a pit was taken at Singleton open air museum.

Fig. 20



Similar and possibly smaller pits would have existed in the Highwoods. The remains of one possible site is in Jack O'Boreham's wood shown in figure 21.

Fig. 21



In the background is an example of one of the old boundary beech trees. This could date back at least 300 years.

These examples of coppicing, tan flaving and on site wood cutting all belong to the past. Today metalled roads, global markets and transport systems, sophisticated large-scale manufacturing, gas and electricity for power and heating have all made small scale local industries redundant factors in the main economy. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the old woodland skills are being seen as part of our heritage, but they will not replace modern technology. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the end of the Highwoods as a working wood.

In the past the Highwoods not only generated a supply of woodland products, but it was also a source of raw material for local brickyards. The woods have an interesting geology in that the Whydown Fault runs east to west across the middle of the woods and both clay and sandstone occur in the surface soil.

After heavy rain a walker in the woods will soon notice areas of sticky clay. Further along the path in the northern section there is a change to a sandy surface and the path becomes well drained.

Bexhill has a long history of brick making and a recent gazetteer lists fifteen known sites of past brickworks in the area. Some of these were 'one-off' yards designed to supply the needs of a specific site, others were kilns serving the local farmers. Today only one major brickyard remains. This yard is in Turkey Road and a photograph of its extensive pit is in figure 5. This pit lies to the east of Pear Tree Lane and the clay seams are shared with the Highwoods.

The sites of the past small brickyards can often be traced by the field names in the area. To the north of Jack O'Boreham's wood the field is named as 'Kiln Field'. On the south west boundary is another 'Kiln Field'. This second field can be traced to the brickworks north of Whydown Road where in 1881 a Thomas Ransome is named as being a brickmaker at Highwoods.

The smaller brickworks drew their supply of clay from their immediate neighbourhood. It would have been too difficult and too expensive to have brought it in from a distance. Clay was extracted from areas near the surface and the clay pits were seldom more than one or two metres in depth. It was dug out by hand and taken to the yard by barrow.

The pond, near the car park, in the southern part of the Highwoods was probably a major source of clay for the yard in Whydown Road. Its oblong shape indicates that it is likely to have been a man made pool. Recently the pond dried out and it was found that the water was leaking through into the Sandstone beneath the clay. This leakage was remedied by reinforcing the shallow clay lining of the pool. It is probable that the Whydown works, which closed in 1909, extracted most of the original clay just leaving a thin layer over the sandstone beneath. Figure 22 shows a photograph of the pool.

Fig. 22



A second large pool shown in figure 23 is in Jack O'Boreham's wood. This became a swimming pool in the 1930's but we will look at its recent history in Part IV. However memories of the pool recorded in "The BexhillVoices" record it as originally being a clay mud hole fed by a spring. Such holes were sometimes used as a source of clay for stock bricks and possibly this was the original use of the small pool later dug out to make a swimming pool. The field immediately to the north of this area had the name 'Kiln Field' in the Bexhill tithe map of 1839.

Jack O'Boreham's wood also contains several small pools in an area where the land has been much disturbed. These pools may have been made by early clay diggers. One speculation for which there is no evidence, is that these pools might have originated in Roman or early medieval times. Small pits were often dug to extract nodes of ironstone which exist in the lower levels of the wealden clay. Later these pits were used for clay extraction. The photograph in figure 24 shows one of the small pits in Jack O'Boreham's wood.

Fig. 23

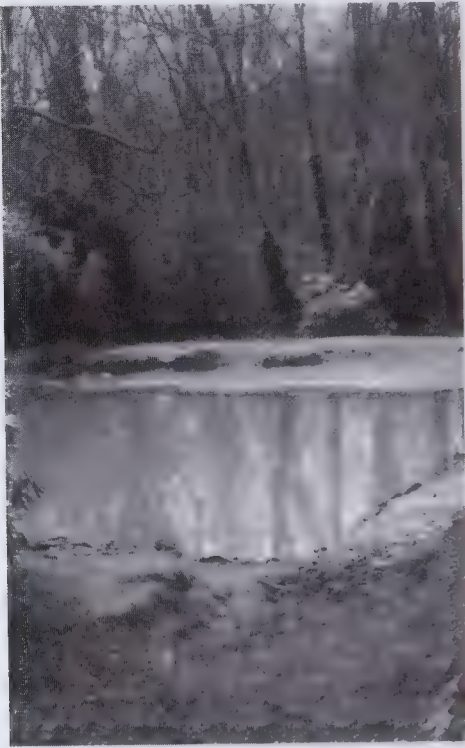


Fig. 24



From this brief introduction to the Highwoods as a working wood it is obvious that at many times in the past it was a hive of activity. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century its life as a working wood was coming to an end.

## **PART IV**

### **THE HIGHWOODS IN THE 20th CENTURY**

# HIGH WOODS ESTATE

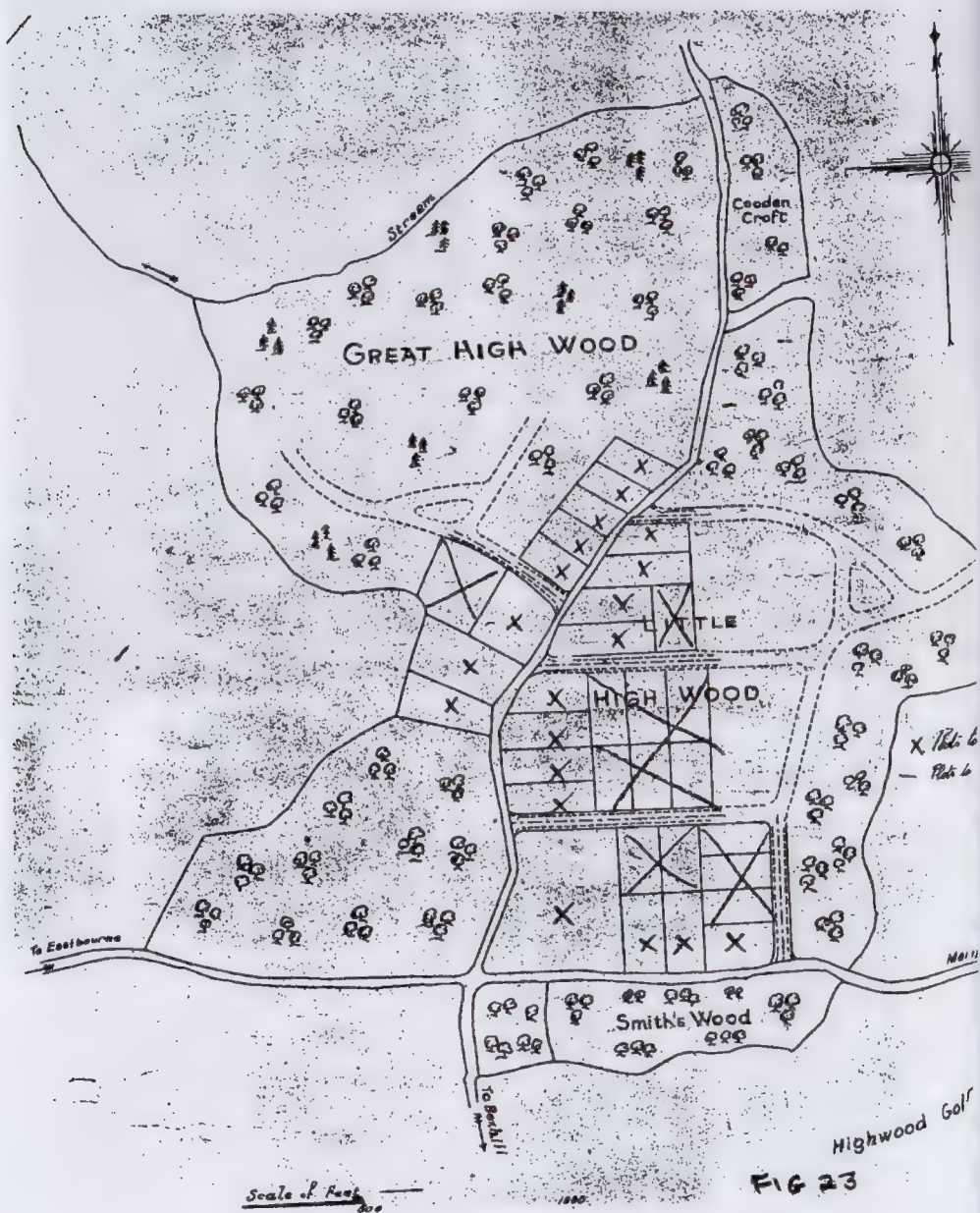


FIG 23

## **PART IV**

### **THE HIGHWOODS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

The economic decline of the small woodlands in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century meant that the woods were often left to revert to their 'natural' state. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Highwoods were becoming a place to enjoy a walk or a picnic. The coppiced areas were becoming overgrown but the paths and open glades would have made it an attractive place. An early copy of the Ward Lock guide for Bexhill writes about 'the pleasant rural surroundings of Bexhill'. It recommends one of the area's many rambles 'which can be made from the town without fatigue'. This walk was to the Highwoods, it directed the walker to take the turning right by the Wheatsheaf in Little Common.

In the early years of the century walking was an expected and acceptable means of getting around. Today we have a car park for visitors and many people in the town have found that they cannot visit the Highwoods because of lack of transport. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw many changes in life style.

The growing population of Bexhill resulted in many of the 'rural surroundings' becoming residential areas. At first these developments did not affect the Highwoods but its parcels of land changed hands several times in the first quarter of the century. In the late twenties the Highwoods began to come into the residential orbit. There is a small Larkin Bros. archive in Bexhill Museum and figure 23 is a copy of a development plan for the Highwoods. The plan is undated and could have been made anytime between the 1930's and the early 1950's.

There is however no record of the Larkin Bros purchasing the land and no building took place. The land shown to the east of Pear Tree Lane later became part of the Turkey Road brickworks and by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century their pit extended right up to the boundary of Pear Tree Lane.

From the mid 1920's the Bexhill Athletic Club made good use of the eastern section of Jack O'Boreham's wood. Reg Cane gives an account of this in the book "Bexhill Voices"

*'Camps go back to 1926. Gunn let us use it after poor old Bailey had to patch it up.... He had a big piggery up there. He then fell ill and we carried on. Charlie Gulliver took it over, a big theatrical man from London. He made a pool for us, often used to bring his theatrical friends up..... I can still recognise it now its part of natural woodland. Tidier than it used to be now the conservation people have tidied it up. Our pool for the camp was a mud hole – now all the site has been demolished. Even had a boxing ring up in the woods. That day the Duke of Gloucester came to visit the camp – we got him to lay a foundation stone'*

In 1938 the Duke of Gloucester visited the town and included a visit to the Highwoods camp.

Up to the 1950's the Highwoods continued to be in private ownership but the public enjoyed an informal access to the woods. One Bexhillian had happy memories of the woodland as he writes:-

*'I used to know the Highwoods well as I grew up in Bexhill. The Highwoods were where we had an annual outing on Ascension Day back in the 1950's. I have sunny memories of running free there with my friends'*

The geology of the Highwoods has often played a part in the history of the use of the land and the 1950's saw a new development. By this time the town was growing rapidly and with this growth came the problem of waste disposal. The Whydown Fault and the ghyll in the Highwoods offered a potential landfill site on the edge of the town. In 1953 the Borough of Bexhill took an action reminiscent of that of William the Conqueror in 1066 and of Elizabeth I in 1561 – the Borough seized the Highwoods. This action was taken by means of a compulsory purchase order under the Acquisition of Land (Authorisation Procedure) Act 1946.

This authorised the Borough to

*'purchase compulsorily for the purpose of providing a place for the deposit of refuse.....'*

This compulsory purchase order applied to Jack O'Boreham's wood, the south western section of the Highwoods and the major part of the Great Highwood. A strip of land of 16 acres fronting Pear Tree Lane was left in private ownership and has remained so ever since.

Before the Borough could establish a landfill site it was itself abolished by the action of the central government. The massive local government reorganisation of 1974 resulted in the land that Bexhill owned in the Highwoods being transferred into the ownership of the East Sussex County Council.

After the transfer the management of the woodland lay dormant until 1980 when it became the centre of a major dispute between the County Council and the people of Bexhill. The affair was sparked off by a government directive that local authorities should take stock of their land holdings and should consider disposing of land which was surplus to their requirements. For some time it was rumoured that the Highwoods was such a piece of land and that the County Council intended to put it up for sale.

In response to these rumours a small group of people in Bexhill formed "The Highwoods Preservation Society" Their stated aim was

*'to resist any plans to develop the Highwoods, to raise money to buy the Highwoods outright and to preserve the Highwoods as a local nature reserve'.*

These aims were supported by the Sussex Trust for Nature Conservation, the R.S.P.B., The Sussex Ornithological Society and the Nature Conservancy Council. An appeal was made to raise £25,000 to £30,000 needed to buy the woods. The Society had only just begun to function when there was a dramatic turn of events.

In June 1980, the future of the Highwoods suddenly became a matter of major public and political interest. On 26<sup>th</sup> June the Federation of Sussex Amenities Society wrote to the Rother District Council planning officer and to interested local organisations. The letter informed the recipients that East Sussex County Council proposed to grant itself planning permission for the low-density development of the Highwoods. This development would include holiday chalets, touring caravans and service buildings. The decision on the proposal was due to be taken in three weeks time on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July.

There was a rapid reaction within Bexhill and a Highwoods Action Committee was formed. Its first meeting was on the 4<sup>th</sup> July and included representatives of the following organisations:-

Rother District Council  
The Ecology Society  
Bexhill Conservative Association  
Highwoods Preservation Society  
Bexhill Ratepayers and Residents Association

The Association of Bexhill Citizens  
Bexhill Chamber of Commerce  
Bexhill Townswomens' Guild

The Ratepayers and Residents Association took a major part in promoting the meeting and in the formation of an action committee. Because of the time factor involved the matter attracted the immediate attention of the local press and the issue was raised on local radio and TV programmes. Lobbying of County Councillors took place and by the time of the meeting of the 15<sup>th</sup> July the County Council decided to withdraw the proposal to grant the planning permission.

The small Highwoods Preservation Society issued a statement in support of the action committee but did not want to become involved in the political disputes which had inevitably arisen. an extract reads:

*“Should the High Woods be preserved as a Woodland, we would as a Society offer to manage it making use of the expertise we have within the Society. The actual work would be done by the Society workers on a completely voluntary basis. . . . .*

*On the question of conservation, we would say that the High Woods is already in an area of outstanding natural beauty, but with good management we could increase the numbers and variety of the wildlife by making available new habitats, etc. Its educational potential is already very good and we are surprised that it has not been used in this connection before.*

*Given proper management this potential could be greatly increased and it would be the intention of the High Woods Preservation Society to provide this management.*

*The Society has no political axe to grind and is concerned purely and simply with the preserving of the High Woods for the enjoyment of the people of Bexhill.”*

After the dramatic events of July 1980 there followed a year of uncertainty. Various options were explored and in April 1981 the action committee was disbanded as it was agreed that its aims were about to be achieved. In July 1981 the land in the Highwoods was leased to Rother District Council for 999 years on a peppercorn rent. Highwoods Preservation Society agreed to take on the management of the woods and after some negotiation a formal management agreement was signed in 1982.

The Preservation Society had started out as a small group of people dedicated to preserving the woodlands and possibly raising funds to buy the freehold. By the time it issued its first formal newsletter in the Summer of 1981 it had become a registered charity and the Earl de la Warr had become its first president. At that time it had twenty eight members. By the end of the century the Society had 230 members and its president was David Streeter who took office after the death of Earl de la Warr.

For the last 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Preservation Society worked hard to rehabilitate and preserve the natural beauty of the Highwoods. The early volunteers faced an enormous task in tackling the results of years of neglect. We cannot underestimate the value of their work in laying the foundations of the Highwoods of today. There have been too many people involved to name all the individuals who have given their time and energy to the project but the Society has been especially fortunate in having had two active chairmen during its lifetime. First Ann Turner from 1980 –1982 followed by Humphry Smith from 1982 –2001.

Twenty years is a very short period in the life of a wood but much has already been achieved. The woodsmen who for centuries ‘worked’ the Highwoods would no doubt approve of the management plan to preserve the areas of coppicing. They might have been puzzled to learn that the Highwoods had been declared a ‘Site of Special Scientific Interest’ and that this would prevent it from becoming an area of commercial activity. Throughout the years the species counts for insects mammals, birds, flowers, and fungi have continued to grow. The ponds and

streams are supporting new aquatic life, and the trees are responding to the clearance of the undergrowth and scrub.

The last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw many volunteers joining the working parties in the woods. Local organisations became interested and some gave practical help. For example the Bexhill Rotarians worked on the creation of a pool near the bottom of the ghyll and the Friends of Sidley Women's Institute raised funds for the making of a new waymarked path through the woods. Many others have helped in the preservation of the Highwoods.

Today many people visit the Highwoods, and figure 26 shows a party on a guided walk led by Alan Malpass.

Fig. 26



### THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

The historians of the future will record the story of the Highwoods in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No doubt the woods will change with the times just as they have always done in the past. Hopefully the Highwoods will continue to give pleasure to the future settlers in Bexhill just as they delight the Bexhillians of today.

April 2002

# ILLUSTRATIONS

## Figure

- 1 Frontispiece – Ancient pollarded Beech tree in the Highwoods.
- 2 Sketch map of the Bexhill area at the time of King Offa 772AD.
- 3 Sketch map as in fig 2 showing the boundary of the civil Parish of Bexhill in 2002.
- 4 Ordnance Survey map of 1813.
- 5 Photograph of the Clay Pits in Turkey Road and the Highlands area of Bexhill.
- 6 Sketch map based on the 1:25000 Ordnance Survey map of 1982.  
This illustrates the separate sections of the Highwoods.
- 7 Sketch map of the Highwoods section of the Duke of Dorset's estate map of 1792.  
Also the index section of the map.
- 8 Photograph of an ancient wood bank with Beech trees in the Highwoods.
- 9 Photograph of the Pollarded Beech Tree.
- 10 Photograph of the western boundary hedge of the Highwoods.
- 11 Sketch map showing the area of Jack O'Boreham's wood within the Highwoods.
- 12 Sketch map based on the Ninfield Tithe Map of 1842 showing the fields named after Jack O'Boreham.
- 13 Copy of the sketch map of Thos. Rolfe's map of the Dunn estate in 1851.
- 14 Old track in the Highwoods.
- 15 Sketch map based on the Bexhill Tithe map of 1839 showing the south western area of the Highwoods.
- 16 Photocopy of the Highwoods Management map.
- 17 Photocopy of late 19<sup>th</sup> century charcoal burners.
- 18 Tan Flawing (from the Sussex County Magazine April 1928).
- 19 Photograph of oak flawing (from the Sussex County Magazine April 1928).
- 20 Photograph of a saw-pit – taken at Singleton Open Air Museum.
- 21 Photograph of a possible site for a 19<sup>th</sup> century saw pit in the Highwoods
- 22 Photograph of the southern pool near the car park
- 23 Photograph of the large pool in the northern part of the Highwoods.
- 24 Photograph of a small man made pool in Jack O'Boreham's wood.
- 25 Copy of the plans for an estate in the Highwoods.
- 26 Photograph of a party on a guided walk in the Highwoods in 1999.

## REFERENCES

Some readers will want to make their own collection of material on the Highwoods. As a starting point the books and maps listed below are worth exploring. A visit to the East Sussex Records Office at Lewes will open up many fascinating lines of enquiry and some of their references are given below – these specifically relate to the Highwoods of Bexhill:-

- Rackham O 1990 *Trees and Woodland in the British landscape* (revised edition) J M Dent & Sons Ltd.
- Jones F 1928 *The Oak and Tan-flawing in Sussex*. The Sussex County Magazine Vol.II No 4 April 1928.
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- Page W (ed) 1907 *The Victoria County History of the County of Sussex*. Vol. II Constable & Co Ltd.
- Saltzman L F (ED) 1937 *The Victoria County History of the County of Sussex* Vol IX Oxford University Press.
- Ordnance Survey maps – A selection back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, show the changing landscape of the area.
- Geological Survey of Great Britain 1980 *Hasting and Dungeoness Sheet 320/21 Solid and Drift* Edn Southampton Ordnance Survey

### *East Sussex Records Office*

- |                   |  |                |
|-------------------|--|----------------|
| TDE 141           | Bexhill Tithe Map                      | 1839           |
| TDE 107           | Ninfield Tithe Map                     | 1842           |
| BAT 4421          | Survey Battle Abbey Estate in Bexhill  | 1724-1743-1779 |
| SAU MS 76         | Documents re the Highwoods             | 1621           |
| SAU MS 85         | Documents re the Highwoods             | 1680           |
| SAU MS 90         | Documents re the Highwoods             | 1700           |
| AMS 6351/6        | Map of Duke of Dorset's estate         | 1792           |
| Deed Packet 10849 | Compulsory Purchase Order of Highwoods | 1953           |

## NOTES

## REF NOTES

Some of the early work in this area is contained in the following references. For a more complete bibliography, see the following references. The following references are listed in the following order: (1) the first reference, (2) the second reference, (3) the third reference, (4) the fourth reference, (5) the fifth reference, (6) the sixth reference, (7) the seventh reference, (8) the eighth reference, (9) the ninth reference, (10) the tenth reference, (11) the eleventh reference, (12) the twelfth reference, (13) the thirteenth reference, (14) the fourteenth reference, (15) the fifteenth reference, (16) the sixteenth reference, (17) the seventeenth reference, (18) the eighteenth reference, (19) the nineteenth reference, (20) the twentieth reference, (21) the twenty-first reference, (22) the twenty-second reference, (23) the twenty-third reference, (24) the twenty-fourth reference, (25) the twenty-fifth reference, (26) the twenty-sixth reference, (27) the twenty-seventh reference, (28) the twenty-eighth reference, (29) the twenty-ninth reference, (30) the thirtieth reference, (31) the thirty-first reference, (32) the thirty-second reference, (33) the thirty-third reference, (34) the thirty-fourth reference, (35) the thirty-fifth reference, (36) the thirty-sixth reference, (37) the thirty-seventh reference, (38) the thirty-eighth reference, (39) the thirty-ninth reference, (40) the fortieth reference, (41) the forty-first reference, (42) the forty-second reference, (43) the forty-third reference, (44) the forty-fourth reference, (45) the forty-fifth reference, (46) the forty-sixth reference, (47) the forty-seventh reference, (48) the forty-eighth reference, (49) the forty-ninth reference, (50) the fiftieth reference, (51) the fifty-first reference, (52) the fifty-second reference, (53) the fifty-third reference, (54) the fifty-fourth reference, (55) the fifty-fifth reference, (56) the fifty-sixth reference, (57) the fifty-seventh reference, (58) the fifty-eighth reference, (59) the fifty-ninth reference, (60) the sixtieth reference, (61) the sixty-first reference, (62) the sixty-second reference, (63) the sixty-third reference, (64) the sixty-fourth reference, (65) the sixty-fifth reference, (66) the sixty-sixth reference, (67) the sixty-seventh reference, (68) the sixty-eighth reference, (69) the sixty-ninth reference, (70) the seventieth reference, (71) the seventy-first reference, (72) the seventy-second reference, (73) the seventy-third reference, (74) the seventy-fourth reference, (75) the seventy-fifth reference, (76) the seventy-sixth reference, (77) the seventy-seventh reference, (78) the seventy-eighth reference, (79) the seventy-ninth reference, (80) the eightieth reference, (81) the eighty-first reference, (82) the eighty-second reference, (83) the eighty-third reference, (84) the eighty-fourth reference, (85) the eighty-fifth reference, (86) the eighty-sixth reference, (87) the eighty-seventh reference, (88) the eighty-eighth reference, (89) the eighty-ninth reference, (90) the ninetieth reference, (91) the ninety-first reference, (92) the ninety-second reference, (93) the ninety-third reference, (94) the ninety-fourth reference, (95) the ninety-fifth reference, (96) the ninety-sixth reference, (97) the ninety-seventh reference, (98) the ninety-eighth reference, (99) the ninety-ninth reference, (100) the hundredth reference.

1. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

2. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

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14. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

15. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

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17. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

18. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

19. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

20. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

21. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

22. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1950, 43, 100-101.

# **HIGHWOODS PRESERVATION SOCIETY**

Registered Charity 28228

Information about the Society can be obtained from the Honorary Warden Alan Malpass of 63 Duke Street, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex. TN39 4JG

